

Asian Cult Cinema



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THE FACTS ABOUT CENSORSHIP IN JAPAN
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MARTIAL ARTS MOVIES
THE SELLING OF JACKIE CHAN IN AMERICA
plus Asian reviews, critiques and observations

Number 13 / \$6.00 / slightly higher outside of USA



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EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT JAPANESE CENSORSHIP

Maki Hamamoto, Tom Weisser & Yuko Mihara Weisser

The Japanese Cinema is, perhaps, the most liberal in the world. That is, regarding subject matter. For many years, Nippon Cinema has broken social taboos with countless films about incest, sodomy, rape, and various forms of misogynist behavior. But, on the other hand, Japan engages in the practice of visually censoring "objectionable material."

Nudity, both male and female, has been prominent in Japanese Cinema since the mid '50s; however this exposure is strictly limited to T&A shots, i.e., chest and back-side. Depiction of genitalia is forbidden; even a glimpse of pubic hair would be grounds for arrest and legal prosecution.

Most Japanese filmmakers frame their movies so this doesn't become an issue (i.e., with long shots from behind, medium shots from the front; or they strategically position a foreign object [like a candle or a bottle] to hide the taboo area). To insure that pubic hair and accidental shots of genitalia were kept from the screen, **Nikkatsu Studios** even developed the *maebari*, a skin-colored tape which is fitted between the actress' legs (this remains a constant source of complaints from the starlets).

Opinions differ widely on "why" this type of censorship exists in Japan. The most common answer is "etiquette." Although they traditionally have "respect for privacy," the Japanese are not particularly modest people. After all, public nudity is accepted and encouraged by the culture. Public Bath Houses are common meeting places for families, friends, and business associates. But even in that environment, flaunting of genitalia is forbidden; etiquette requires that the clients cover themselves with towels until they enter the water.

As cinematic nudity became more commonplace in the imported International films, Japan developed "visual censorship." This is a technique of camouflaging genitalia by ① digitally scrambling the imagine of the objectionable area or ② covering the pubic region with a white fuzzy dot (*fogging*).

Similar to the **MPAA** (Motion Picture Association of America) in United States, there is a self-governing rating board in Japan called **Eirin**. This agency became involved in that country's most publicized case of obscenity in 1965 when they assisted the government in court against filmmaker **Tetsuji Takechi** for his film **Black Snow** [see the book **Japanese Cinema: The Essential Handbook** for details]. The trial became a media circus. Renown authors and filmmakers (including **Nagisa Oshima** and **Seijun Suzuki**) testified on behalf of the accused director. The trial became a war zone, pitting the avant garde intellectuals against the conservative ethics mavins. Director **Takechi** won his day in court, thus creating a climate for adult-oriented fare in Japan, but the practice of visual censorship remained firm. Significantly, the Takechi case pertained to "freedom for subject matter" not nudity.

While the Japanese people seem to enjoy intellectual sexual liberalism, they do not appear to favor relaxing of the laws regarding "forbidden genitalia." Their culture, or perhaps their disciplined lifestyle, has taught them to **not** want to see this area of the body, so seemingly that's what they prefer. This is, initially, a difficult concept for an American to grasp. But it's one of many cultural differences between Japan and the USA. In a similar but un-

related analogy, many Japanese wonder "why fireworks are illegal in the United States but firearms aren't."

Over the years, much erroneous information has existed regarding Nippon censorship. *Asian Cult Cinema* went directly to the Japanese rating board, Eirin, to get some answers. Initially, the authorities were reluctant to talk publicly, but they slowly warmed up to the idea. ACC correspondent Maki Hamamoto was eventually granted the following interview with Eirin Representative Mr Kamiya on May 1, 1996.

□

ACC: What does "Eirin" mean?

Eirin: "Ei" is an abbreviation for "film" and "rin" is short for "ethics." Eirin comes from *Eiga Rinri Kanri Iinkai* (which, in English, means Administration Commission of Motion Picture Code of Ethics). Initially, the organization was called *Eiga Rinri Kitei Kanri Iinkai*. But in January of 1957, we dropped "Kitei" from the name. The word really didn't belong in our name. It's too strong, meaning "ruling" or "legislation."

ACC: You're not involved in legislation or prosecution of the moral codes?

Eirin: Absolutely not. We merely make suggestions to movie studios and production companies.

ACC: When was Eirin formed?

Eirin: In June 1949.

ACC: By whom?

Eirin: The 6 major motion picture companies formed an organization called *Nihon Eiga Rengo-kai* (Japanese Film Alliance). That group created Eirin.

ACC: Who funds Eirin? How does the company make money? Is it government financed or self sufficient?

Eirin: The "Japanese Film Alliance"

funds us indirectly. It started with six studios back in '49; But we've had periods when there were 44 movie companies in our organization. Currently there are 23 members, including a few representatives from foreign motion picture studios. It is a non-profit organization. Eirin is not associated with, nor financed by, the Japanese government.

ACC: Wasn't it connected with the government at one time?

Eirin: The first director of the board was Mr Takahashi, the former Minister of Education, at that time there was some association between the government and the organization. But all that ended by the mid '50s. Today, the director is Mr Shimizu. He's a lawyer by profession. And he's been instrumental in attracting members of the film community, especially writers and critics, to be members of the Approval Board.

So, in answer to the original question, Eirin receives operating money directly from the "examining fee" it charges studios to review the product.

ACC: How much does Eirin charge the studio for a screening?

Eirin: 100 Yen per meter of film. The cost for an average movie screening would be 246,600 Yen. (Editor's note: approximately \$2500 in USA currency.)

ACC: What happens if you screen a film which you find to be objectionable?

Eirin: In that case, we return the movie to the studio without our seal of approval. We make suggestions on how the film could be altered to fit within the current legal restrictions.

ACC: All right, let's say the studio follows your suggestions and makes the changes, then what? Do they resubmit the film and pay the screening fee again?

Eirin: Well of course they do. How else

*Jun Miho is the girl who falls in love with her brother in **Pink Curtain** (1984)*



would we know the film was altered to our specifications. Then, if the film falls within the legal perimeters, we issue our seal.

*ACC: What happens if a studio refuses to make the alterations? like the controversial case against **Pink Curtain** in '84. Does Eirin get involved in a law suit?*

Eirin: We do not sue nor bring lawsuits against anyone, studios or theaters. That's the responsibility of the police force. And sometimes, in the case of foreign films, the minister of Finance can levy such suits through the Japanese Customs Bureau.

Eirin examines and makes suggestions. This organization has two functions: ① to examine the film and advise the movie studio as to the current legal situation regarding censorship and obscenity based on our interpretation of the law; and ② if,

according to our criteria, the studio has acted within the legal standards, we will support them against any governmental prosecution which may arise. Advise and protect, that's our position.

ACC: What type of obscenity cases have involved Eirin?

Eirin: There have been obscenity cases against studios. But usually the director is sued for "public indecency." Sometimes actresses are also prosecuted because of the way they allowed themselves to be photographed.

ACC: What was the first case?

Eirin: No comment. You have to conduct that research on your own.

ACC: Do you edit scenes from films?

Eirin: I want to emphasize our position again. We do not censor. We only advise the studios pertaining to the content of the films. Eirin has the responsibility of viewing the movie and issuing a certification seal. We cannot give our Approval Code if the film contains material which we know is against the law, material which would be considered obscene.

ACC: Since theaters are also members of the Alliance, a film without the Eirin seal will not get distribution. Isn't that correct?

Eirin: You are correct, most theaters in Japan will not run a film that doesn't have the Approval Code. However, I think there are some theaters, some underground theaters, showing films which include objectionable elements, that is-- films without the Eirin stamp. But that's out of our jurisdiction, it's a matter for the police.

ACC: Do you advise the police authorities of such films?

Eirin: It's frankly none of our concern. The authorities usually find out, one way or another.

ACC: So, let's say *Eirin* views a film and finds an objectionable segment, for example: full frontal nudity. Who is responsible for fogging it? Does *Eirin* visually fog prints?

Eirin: We do not censor or fog. We merely suggest. All sanitizing is done by the releasing studio. Usually the prints are visually altered before they are submitted to us for viewing.

ACC: What is actually being fogged? Pubic hair or genitalia?

Eirin: Remember, we only make suggestions to the filmmakers. But, today, I guess genitalia is being censored. Since August 1994, with the Japanese release of the French movie "La Belle Noiseuse," the rule has softened. This film was released theatrically without the fogging of any pubic hair. Today, the interpretation of the "public indecency" laws seems to be if hair is naturally part of the film's expression then it is considered acceptable. Regarding "La Belle Noiseuse," the main actress is an artist's model, considered an "object of art." To censor that would be interpreted as presumptuous.

ACC: Have other films opened theatrically without the fogging of the pubic hair?

Eirin: If there hasn't, there should be. But that's not an official comment. All we're saying is the laws have been softened. Magazines and books are no longer censoring "hair" at all. (Editor's note: since August 1994, books and magazines generally have complete freedom to publish photos depicting pubic hair and, and to some extent, female genitalia. A black dot, however, must fog the woman's clitoris. Male genitalia is still forbidden.) But, regarding movies, "fogging" hasn't become an issue. To be honest, we aren't sure the Japanese filmgoer wants any change in status quo. Our research shows that moviegoers don't care to see genitalia.

ACC: Do you have any thoughts on the future of Japanese censorship?

Eirin: Officially, I have no comment.

□

Since August of 1994, the laws regarding censorship of printed matter have indeed softened in Japan. This, however, is currently not evident in Cinema. Movies continue to be fogged (with the lone exception of *Jacques Rivette*'s 240 minute opus *La Belle Noiseuse*). On the other hand, magazines and books now feature shots of models displaying pubic hair.

Actress Natsuki Ozawa (from *Zero Woman*, see back cover of ATC #9) started the ball rolling with her taboo-breaking photo book *Intimate Ozawa*. Since its publication, the walls have tumbled, and today hair (not genitalia) is commonplace in Japanese publications.

It seems that Japanese Cinema has not followed that liberal path because there is some concern about "opening the flood gates too quickly." Many political groups are already expressing concern over how this new sexual "freedom" could hurt the budding, delicate women's movement in Japan, traditionally an aggressive male-dominated environment. Opponents to the movement point at the already blatantly misogynist fare prevalent in Japanese Cinema; they warn "relaxing of the censorship laws" would result in depiction of "greater abuse in the name of freedom of expression." These activists are asking the government to create a new set of moderate "restrictions for a modern Japan."

The censorship laws probably won't change too dramatically until the government can develop certain basic criteria (such as, a guarantee of limited exposure on television, and stricter enforcement of age requirements in the theaters). The whole thing could result in major social upheaval. This is a serious change in public conventions; it has been likened to the kind of fallout which would take place in America if marijuana should ever be legalized.

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BOMB DISPOSAL **OFFICER: Baby Bomb**

1995

Directed by Jamie Luk

Reviewed by Tim Merrill

They say you can never judge a book by its cover, but with a title like, *Bomb Disposal Officer: Baby Bomb*, I had to scratch my head and wonder for a moment what this one was going to be all about. Fortunately, I was pleasantly surprised on several levels. The first thing that struck me about this film is the amazing role reversal on the part of Anthony Wong. Like Hollywood, I find Asian cinema often falling into the rut of stereotyping actors and actresses. Chow Yun Fat will always play the strong silent type, and Jackie Chan will always play the acrobatic bumbling fool, and very rarely do you see actors trying to expand out of these personas. Anthony Wong has been known for playing absolute psychopaths, as in his amazing performance in *Untold Story*, or playing an absolute bastard in such films as *Full Contact* and *Love To Kill*. In the case of *Baby Bomb*, Wong plays a bomb disposal officer in search of a mad bomber, and it's refreshing to see him play the hero, as opposed to his usual role as the heavy. Wong is hilarious throughout the film as he is teamed up with Lau Ching Wan as the fearless and often drunken bomb disposal officers.

The film basically deals with the adventures of Wong and Wan as John and Peter hot on the pursuit of a crazed



-- Anthony Wong (left) with Lau Ching Wan

bomber randomly blowing up the city. Eventually the duo meet Mary, a poor girl thrown out into the street by an irate boyfriend, and soon invite her to move into their apartment. The fun begins as John and Peter try to compete to see who will be the first one to score with Mary. Director Jamie Luk set up some of the most hilarious scenes, as Mary brings home a group of Christians and John and Peter are forced to take part in a prayer group with praying and singing, when all they want to do is wind up getting laid. After a heavy night of drinking, John and Peter both wind up bedding down with Mary, at the same time, and you guessed it, both wind up getting her pregnant. At first, both try and deny that it's their seed that did the deed, but eventually both take responsibility for the baby. Meanwhile, the bomber, looking like Michael Douglas in *Falling Down*, becomes upset with the heroics of the bomb disposal officers, and decides to put them out of business for good.

The other thing that impressed me about the film is the fact that it's sprinkled with doses of violence, action, and suspense. Even though, *Baby Bomb*, is a comedy, it opens with a violent scene of a child being blown up in a department store while shopping for Easter

candy. There's no way that a comedy filmed in North America would open up with such absolute violence, but despite the fact, it works. At times the film almost seems like a combination between Speed and Three Men And A Baby, and as crazy as that may seem, the film is still enjoyable. I recommend this film to anyone who needs a light change of pace from the usual total gung ho action that you've come to expect from Hong Kong cinema. Bomb Disposal Officer: Baby Bomb, shows that the right amount of action, comedy, and exploding civilians can be an enjoyable winning combination.

LEGENDARY PANTY MASK

1991

Directed by Takafumi Nagamina
Reviewed by Steve Sanders

Starring: Miyuki Katori, Kanako Fujitani,
Yoko Oshima

One of the joys of watching Asian films for me is that they often times are totally different than Western films. Heroes die, evil often triumphs, and sometimes I can't figure the damn thing out no matter how hard I try. Legendary Panty Mask fits into this latter category.

This doesn't mean the film is bad, I just think it is the white boy in me missing the cultural boat. Panty Mask makes enough sense that you can follow it, I just got the nagging feeling that I was missing the bigger picture and it would all be perfectly clear if I knew one little fact that every one in Japan knows from the moment they are born. It's like having a dream in which everything seems normal but at the same time everything is just a little off. I'll try and give it a

quick description, and bear with me if I don't do the plot justice..

Legendary Panty Mask starts off with a group of people heading to what looks like the strangest drag queen bar I've ever seen. Complete with very strange bald queens singing "Row Row Row Your Boat," it's quite a bizarre place. The queens get the hero of our story a bit drunk and he ends up in women's clothes. As he looks into a mirror at himself he pictures himself pummelling the



-- Legendary Panty Mask

singing baldies and is suddenly transported to a countryside.

He wanders a bit and soon comes to a town that is populated by nothing but nuns, Japanese school girls and one grizzled female bartender who looks like a former dance hall singer. Men are outlawed in this town, and this is proven by the nuns shooting up a picture of John Wayne that some of the school girls have found. Everyone there drinks warm Calpis, which is a milky pop that is supposed to be popular in Japan. The Nuns seem to have a supply of cold Calpis, which they keep chilled by an ice sculpture of a penis that is stored in a coffin within a coffin within a coffin, but this is only distributed rarely amongst themselves. Somehow the nuns have caused the sun never to set and it is daylight all the time.

The main tension lies in wondering if our hero, who is taken in as a girl will be discovered by the man-hating nuns and killed. Twice he is found out and each time one of the school girls dons a skimpy outfit with a panty as a mask and rescues him from the evil nuns. Each time she appears the sky goes dark and nighttime returns.

There is this strange lesbian message through this whole Japanese schoolgirl thing and we actually do get to see some of the nuns making out before they are discovered. Toss in the weird tension of our hero sleeping in the same room with a bunch of half dressed schoolgirls and you've got one weird sexual undercurrent.

I know this didn't make much sense. But if you have lesbian nuns, tons of half dressed schoolgirls, some weird milky pop and very little ice, you don't need an explanation. It's all so strange that you can't help but watch and enjoy it. I might not be able to tell you what it was about exactly, but I can recommend it. Now quit listening to me and go get it. If you figure it out, let me know.

VIRUS

1980

Directed by Kinji Fukasaku
Reviewed by Raymond Ranaletta

"Those who can't remember the past are condemned to repeat it". A chilling, if cliched, resignation uttered by one dying man to another. In this case it comes almost halfway through this Japanese lensed epic and the statement of defeat is rendered more horrific coming, as it does, from Senator Barker to President Richardson as they wait for death, in the oval office, helpless to prevent the destruction of civilization from, MM-88, the killer virus of the title.

At just over 2 1/2 hrs., Virus truly is an epic vision of man made armageddon. Whatever Virus lacks in continuity and clarity, it surely makes up for in a realistically terrifying look at how mankind, ever thirsty for the continued quest for power and prominence, succumbs to its' own devices, the evil mechanization of this quest, a corrupt governmental structure.

Virus tells the story of Operation Phoenix, a secret U.S. Defense Dept. study in biological warfare. A seemingly unstoppable strain of genetically altered pathogenic viruses has been created by scientists under the direction of Col. Rankin. A portion of this virus has been stolen (the story never makes clear how) and through a series of events ends up in the Soviet Union's hands. The virus ends up being unleashed in a plane crash and quickly spreads throughout the continent, first showing up in Italy where it becomes known as the Italian flu. As the terrible plague spreads, Senator Barker uncovers origins of the virus through a scientist, Dr. Mirer, who was about to blow the cover on the project before being detained and committed by Col. Rankin. The President, until

now, unaware of his own Defense Departments' action, rightly becomes indignant over the turn of events and the betrayal of General Garland, Col. Rankin's superior, who was obviously aware of what had been taking place. General Garland, a power mad psychopath (Gov't. Official = Nutcase, that's a surprise), takes it one step further by now attempting to place all the blame on the Soviets' for what has occurred and demands the activation of the Nuclear "Automatic Reaction System" to show them Soviets whose boss. The President tells the General to take a hike, but refuses to publicly acknowledge the origin of the virus, thereby negating any/all help that could be afforded by the world's scientific community. The one glimmer of hope left is that the virus is dormant in sub zero temperatures. As a result, govt stations in the Antarctic are untouched, and the President in his last words, asks for all nationalities in the Antarctic to pull together and attempt to find a vaccine for mankind's survival. Ahh, but remember General Garland. That sneaky ole devil goes ahead and activates the ARS system before he dies, thereby triggering the similar Soviet system. Back in the Antarctic, a Japanese scientist has determined that a large scale earthquake, will strike Washington, detonating the nuclear weapons put on standby by General Garland. No big deal except that the Soviet system will respond and one of its' targets in the U.S. base in the Antarctic!! The Japanese scientist, Dr. Yoshizumi, along with Major Carter, race to the U.S. in a submarine in an attempt to deactivate the ARS before the earthquake strikes. Do they succeed? Does mankind survive?

Virus, while a Japanese production, contains the equivalent of an all-star US B- movie cast. Glenn Ford, Henry Silva, Robert Vaughn, Bo Svenson, Chuck Connors, George Kennedy and Olivia

Hussey join Japanese stalwart Sonny Chiba in this engrossing and captivating film told with a decidedly Japanese flavor. With the exception of a hard to swallow melodramatic ending, Virus is a vivid and chaotic nightmare brought forth with well done special effects which enhance the unfolding drama with a constant building of intensity that reaches its' peak with the President's final words to the Antarctic survivors. The films 2nd half deals with some intriguing elements concerning survival and procreation, leading up to eventual Nuclear Holocaust. Virus is the ultimate "cultural melting pot" of disasters movies. Made prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War, it remains a valid and stern warning, which, unheeded, could very well result in a similar like situation. Check out Virus. Top shelf entertainment with a strong message.

SEX LIFE OF 4 BEAUTIFUL WITCHES

1991

Directed by Tu Mah Wu
Reviewed by Brick Reno

I coughed. I yawned. I looked at my watch. Sex Life Of 4 Beautiful Witches starts out flaccidly and and doesn't twitch for 90 minutes. It was my misfortune to spend an evening watching boring people have boring sex and I've got to warn you, "Don't go up near Camp Crystal Lake!". This movie sucks.

Flashing red lights in the trees and witches on strings float through the opening credits, cut to an Elk Lodge. Men are seated, drinking and having conversation.

They chat for what seems an eternity without the aid of subtitles, and I sink

and rub the remote. Three guys leave the food and fun and set off for home. Halfway through their journey they stop to talk and talk and talk. One holds his stomach and broadly gestures of an imminent bowel movement. He quick steps off to find a tree. Untying his garments and tickling his ass in the grass, his concentration prevents him from hearing the music swell announcing the arrive of witch number one. She lands, she stands, and he rubs his hands randily. All for one and one for all, he runs back to tell his friends.

The three men make their way back to find that the witch has summoned two friends. The women strike defensive poses and I expect a brawl. Suddenly, the earth shakes violently, actually, someone off screen knocked the camera and they left it in. Everyone pairs off in twosomes and start to fuck. This sex scene

holds only minor interest. Someone rubs his dick on someone else's foot, a light skin flute melody sets the mood, and the only things hard are the cuts to new positions.

Eventually, two women change into animals and the men unwittingly fuck them. I sort of laugh as the goat, framed in a closeup, rocks to and fro. I'm with

you, pal. The third witch grows fangs, the camera tastefully pans away, and her partner utters the only sound I understand, "uhhhhhh". He's dead.

I thought of a game to play to make all the dead time pass. Throughout the movie, famous contemporary horror flick main themes chime. I confirmed three and couldn't ID a handful. You could also analyze the textbook examples of

padding a film. Oh, look! He's walking around admiring the countryside. Okay, he's still walking, and it's really hot out. Ah, a nice cool stream, nobody's around, get naked! A beautiful girl watches, want in her eyes. Zero originality.

A vague plot separates the three sex scenes: There is this wedding, the groom gets drugged, fucks a witch and the bride walks in. The groom gets mad and tries to chop the witch into little pieces. With little success, he whacks

away until the witch changes into the bride. The blushing bride dies with a machete stuck in her neck, and in great tragic form, the groom weeps like Ruby Dee at the end of Jungle Fever.

The only thing of any value whatsoever about *Sex Life of 4 Witches* is that if I ever really want to break up a late night party, I'll pop this in



ASIAN CULT CINEMA

Dedicated to art of action and exploitation

DAYDREAM

1981

Directed by Tetsuji Takechi

Reviewed by Frank Kilzer

Daydream is a Japanese movie of little dialogue but a lot of eroticism. After the film's copulating start and credits, the next scene is a dentist's office. A young man named Kurasai enters to have a tooth pulled. While in the waiting room, a beautiful kimono-clad woman enters. Both go in the shared office and the dentist starts working on the woman's teeth. After a good rinse, she seems very aroused by the gum massage that the dentist has given her. Kurasai has been watching this but now the doctor has both patients anesthetized. After making sure Kurasai is out, the dentist starts to disrobe the woman. He begins caressing her naked body and then even the nurses start stripping and get into a sexual frenzy. This event is the first in a series of loosely linked dreams and nightmares. However, these erotic and very explicit dreams come from both Kurasai and the kimono woman's minds. Given the name Seiko, her dreams are graphic and stimulating. Kurasai's visions, on the other hand, are much darker. The third person in most of the dreams is the nameless dentist. To Kurasai, he is evil and means only harm. She sees him as the lover and responds to him that way.

After the orgy in the office, there are two scenes that cut back and forth. One which Seiko is being tied up, whipped, and raped by the dentist. In his dream, Kurasai is helpless and can't break the transparent barrier to save her. In Seiko's dream, she is on the receiving end (no fogging in this movie) enjoying all of the dentist's skill. A later part has Seiko sneaking out of a hotel naked.

Making it to her car, Seiko soon finds the dentist in her headlights, his cape and arms open like a vampire (he does this often), scaring her. She turns the car but there he is again, so she runs him down, leaving a decapitated body. When Seiko arrives at the parking lot, Kurasai is there. They go to a car wash to clean off the blood when the dentist is there yet again! She runs to Kurasai but soon (my favorite part) she is slowly being pulled back through the car wash machine. This turns out to be fine with Seiko as her nude body gets soaped up and the rotating brushes on her skin make her ecstatic.

The director, Tetsuji Takechi, has more vignettes. Some take place in unusual places and he frames his shots very well. Daydream straddles the fence as "erotica" or "porn." Simply eliminate the hardcore stuff and the film would still be steamy. Still, Takechi does show some disturbing insight into two people's psyches. Seiko gets all the sexual attention in every scene. Kurasai wants to play the hero role but fails. He is a voyeur throughout, the last image ending violently. The couple do get together afterward and the end of the film does a strange little twist. I can recommend Daydream for the open-minded. Just don't lend it to your mom, okay?

SHOOT TO KILL

1995

Directed by Wong Kam Tin

Reviewed by John Crawford

Here is the story of an 18 year old kid who quickly becomes a notorious psycho-killer running the streets of HK and the detective squad assigned to capture him. This shot-on-video production feat-

ures several interesting performances, some nifty montage, and some nice camera work. It's also gruesome, perverted, and extremely violent.

Featuring Danny Lee, who was Inframan in the great sci-fi classic of the same name and co-starred in John Woo's *The Killer*, as the chief of detectives, this video showcases some hot young performers and some old timers you will certainly recognize. I can't name them for you as the review copy I received has not one English subtitle on the main feature. All you get is the beautiful Cantonese spoken by the performers.

Presented by Magnum Video Productions, the movie begins with the kid, Lo, being released from the local correctional institution. He's picked up

at the gate by a couple of his crime buddies and they head off seeking revenge. Lo and his pals attack the rival gang with knives and machetes. Returning home, the young hood fights with his father over past events in a gripping scene. He is disowned by his family for his evil ways and vows to be more successful than his simple hardworking parents. The young actor who stars as Lo is incredible in the film. His eyes are full of scorn and hatred. His performance is over the top!

Now on the road to ruin, Lo and his gang do a robbery for a big crime boss. Things go badly and Lo kills one of the robbery victims. This enrages the boss and he argues with Lo afterwards. Big Mistake! Lo is pure psycho and he chops off the boss's hand when dissatisfied with his share of the take! Lo isn't done yet. He slashes the boss's throat ear to ear. All this takes place in the first 15 minutes and Lo is just getting warmed up!

After this mutilation murder, Lo's gang is brought to the attention of the Hong Kong police force. The focus of the script



shifts from the punks to the detective squad assigned to investigate the murder. The actors cast as squad members give an ensemble group feel to the performances. The interaction between the players is most compelling. When they lose focus on the mission at hand, Danny Lee is trotted out to give some stoic inspirational speeches. It is somewhat bizarre to see a star as big as Lee in this video. Production values in this feature range from network broadcast standard to porno video quality. Portions of the soundtrack are reminiscent of late 70's - early 80's California porno films featuring bad guitar, synthesizer and synth drum effects.

The filmmakers do a lot of interesting things with editing. In the early part of the film, there is a repeated motif of commuter trains silently passing by. Lo's father is in the poultry business and there is a repeated shot of a chicken having its throat cut. I think this is a symbol for some real or imagined childhood abuse. There are also several nifty montages involving sights and sounds of Hong Kong.

MY FATHER IS A HERO

1995

Directed by Corey Yuen

(aka Yuen Kwei)

Reviewed by Nick Chapman

In Mandarin (dubbed), with Chinese and English sub-titles

My Father is a Hero is one of the latest of what seems like a flood of Jet Li films to come out of Hong Kong in the last two years, taking its place with such other contemporary-setting action pics as High Risk (1995), directed by Wong Jing, and Dr. Wai In The Scripture With No Words (1996), and historical "kung fu" films like The New Legend of Shaolin (1994), directed by Wong, and Tai Chi Master (1994), directed by Yuen Woo Ping.

But while all of these films have, surprisingly, been fairly good, My Father is a Hero, directed by Corey Yuen, is clearly one of the best of the lot. Yuen's reknown skill with action sequences is readily apparent, but perhaps more surprising is the crisp and assured direction and editing of the non-action scenes, which would be a credit in any film.

Yuen's direction is far superior to Wong's uneven and often predictable work in his films starring Jet Li. (Interestingly, this movie was co-written by Jing, but is much better than that director's usual work.)

There's never a dull moment, and the main characters are rendered much more three-dimensionally than in most Hong Kong action films. To coin a phrase, this is a movie about people who happen to be action stars, not (just) an action movie. And Jet Li's co-star in this movie, Anita Mui - like Michelle Khan (Yeoh) in Tai Chi Master but unlike Wong Jing's favorite actress, Chingmy

Yau (in both High Risk and New Legend of Shaolin) - has both the screen magnetism and the fighting moves to be believable as Li's love interest.

Perhaps most important to fans of Jet Li and readers of ACC, the action sequences in this movie are, if not superb, then truly first-rate, as one would expect from Yuen. Li's characteristically acrobatic and visually compelling Wu Shu moves are displayed to real advantage in fights that are often prop-driven and have Li literally bouncing off the walls. When guns are involved, the fights resemble more the shoot-out in the high rise from Wong's High Risk than John Woo's more original and appealing gun-fight choreography, but they are better put together than Wong's. While these gun battles work perhaps not as well as the hand-to-hand fights, Yuen and the fight choreographer make the most of Jet Li's moves - he often shoots as if he were holding a Wu Shu sword rather than a semi-automatic pistol, but on him, it looks great. Yuen earlier directed Li in 1992's outstanding The Legend of Fong Sai Yuk and clearly the two work well together.

Li plays Kung Wei, an undercover PSB cop in Beijing, who keeps his work a secret even from his wife and son (played by Tse Miu, the same appealing action-tyke who appeared as his son in New Legend of Shaolin). Kung is sent on a secret mission to infiltrate a gang in Hong Kong that has been smuggling treasures out of China. In order to give him a believable cover, he is arrested in front of his family and neighbors and thrown into jail with someone involved in the smuggling gang, then allowed to escape. (Shades of Supercop!)

After hooking up with the gang, led by a psycho named Mr. Po (Yu Rong Guang), who always wears shades, Kung participates in a rip-off of some "Lithuanian" arms dealers, who are trying to sell the gang some special new

liquid explosives. In one of the film's most extended fight scenes, the two gangs shoot it out in the middle of a glass-walled restaurant, which is completely destroyed in the process. Left behind, Kung makes his escape with a hostage, Fong (Anita Mui), a beautiful female cop who had been in the restaurant on a tryst with her lover, a married fellow cop.

After Kung makes good his escape, Fong becomes fascinated with him, and follows his trail back to Beijing, eventually locating and befriending his family. When Kung's wife dies, Fong takes the son Siu Ku back to Hong Kong with her. Siu Ku is then captured by the gang, since Mr. Po has come to suspect that Kung might be an undercover cop.

From there the film moves to a satisfying final showdown between the reunited father and son team and the bad guys, on board a ship. This fight sequence is notable for the way Jet Li and Tse Miu use lengths of rope as weapons, and for a great fighting move that might be called "Deadly Yo-Yo Son Kung Fu" if this were an historic kung fu flick. Descending into the middle of the fight on a ladder from a hovering helicopter, Anita Mui will also remind viewers of her excellent wire-work fighting in *Heroic Trio*.

Like so many of the better Hong Kong films of recent years, *My Father Is A Hero* is full of sly moments of humor and intertextual references. When Kung (Li) and the other escapee arrive in Hong Kong, the first thing they do is buy a beeper - a witty jab at the telecommunications-mania that seems to have infected residents of the colony. When Anita Mui's character meets the son, he comments that she is "not pretty, but attractive," in a clear reference to Mui's reputation in Hong Kong as not conventionally pretty like some other HK superstar actresses, but attractive and appealing in a more sophisticated way.

Unfortunately, some of the humor of the original film was lost in the video-version seen by this reviewer. When Mui's character arrives in Beijing, there is an extended sequence of verbal slapstick playing off her inability to speak Mandarin. In the all-Mandarin dubbed version, these sequence is, understandably, a non-starter.

As satisfying as this movie is as a piece of superior Hong Kong action film making, it is also interesting for the issues it raises about the relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China. When Kung is being dispatched to infiltrate the Hong Kong gang, his superior explains: "We have thousands of police in Hong Kong already. We just want Hong Kong to be calm and peaceful." As in films like 1994's *Wonder Seven*, directed by Ching Siu Tung, then, we find a Hong Kong film depicting Hong Kong as infiltrated by undercover cops from China.

But while this might be expected to be a source of anxiety in light of Hong Kong concerns about authoritarian social changes in the wake of reunification, instead it is shown as a force for stability and even for "good," since in both films the infiltrating agents are the heroes of the film and fight violent crime in Hong Kong. Also as in *Wonder Seven*, *My Father Is A Hero* makes a romantic couple out of a mainland male cop and a woman from Hong Kong. (Interestingly, the mainland agents in both films are played by real mainlanders, with all-China gymnastics champion Lee Ning in *Wonder Seven*.) The films thus depict, in a human form, a happy marriage of the colony and the mainland, and thus again address anxieties of the now-imminent reunification.



A TOUCH OF EVIL

1994

Directed by Tony Au
Reviewed by William Roberts

*-- Elizabeth Lee*

A Touch Of Evil (starring: Tony Leung Kar Fai, Elizabeth Lee, Rosamund Kwan, and Michael Wong) is one of those stereotypical films where everyone tries to avoid the stereotype by making the characters walking contradictions. You know the type. The "bad" drug dealer who is a nice guy. The "good" cop who is abusive and deceitful. The space cadet girlfriend who really has a head on her shoulders. You know what I mean. We've seen it all a hundred times before.

The story is simple enough -- tough cop Leung wants to get nice guy/drug dealer King. So Leung bullies girlfriend Coco to spy on King. It seems her previous boyfriend (another drug dealer) left \$6 million in Coco's bank account and Leung has frozen her account. \$60,000 of the account, however, is money she earned but can't get. So she agrees to plant listening devices in King's car and office. But Coco falls in love with King and tries not to incriminate him. She removes the listening devices but she is tricked by the sneaky Leung into betraying her lover. King, when he discovers her betrayal, realizes she was forced into it, forgives her but has to make one more deal in order to save his boss (who raised him as a child) from the clutches of a rival gang. Of, course it all ends with lots of blood and guys with two pistols. (Why is it that all these directors -- American, Chinese, Mexican -- think two handguns are better than one?) If you can't aim worth a damn with one gun, what makes you think you are going to hit a target with two?)

If anything, **A Touch Of Evil** has done what no other movie has done before --

make all the main characters unlikable or boring. Coco, who is in most of the movie, acts so whiney that you wonder what King sees in her. Leung, the cop, is seedy and sleazy. And King, who is the only one close to likable, is just as he is described from the beginning: "a little dumb, but honest." One has to wonder what Coco sees in him when he doesn't return her calls and virtually ignores her during part of the film. If the love story had made more sense, **A Touch Of Evil** might have worked with its sad ending (not everyone makes it through the final gunfight). But as it is, you couldn't care less. In fact, you kind of hope that there was a bullet with everyone's name on it.

Put **A Touch Of Evil** on your list of UNtouchables.

THE ADVENTURERS

1995

Directed by Ringo Lam
Reviewed by John Crawford

The latest movie by superstar director, Ringo Lam, is a riveting work, chock full of action and adventure. It features gun-fighting, explosions, and a helicopter chase. Starring Hong Kong heartthrob Andy Lau, the movie is full of great

characters. The script, by Lam and Sandy Shaw Lai-King, is brilliantly constructed.

The film opens in Cambodia in 1975 during the communist takeover. A young boy, Yan, sees his parents and sister killed by a traitor who had been a CIA double agent. Twenty years later, this kid grows up to be Andy Lau. He was rescued from the war zone by his uncle, Shang, portrayed by the great David Chiang, who also works for the CIA and becomes the orphaned boy's mentor. Chiang was a huge star in the 60's and 70's. He appeared in many, many martial arts films made by the Shaw Brothers Studios including *Heroic Ones* and *The New One-Armed Swordsman*. He turns in a poignant, sensitive performance as the cool CIA operative guiding his nephew in his quest for his revenge against the killer.

One of the great things about *The Adventurers* is the presence of two [not one, but two] strong female characters in the script. The first one is the mistress of the killer, portrayed by the wonderful performer Rosamund Kwan Chi-Lam. Attracted to Lau, she rescues him when he is injured in a botched assassination attempt. The writers have drawn an extremely complex personality for this talented actress. From the flirting glances exchanged with Lau to the look of horror when she is used as human shield by her so-called lover, Ms. Kwan Chi-Lam gives a powerful performance.

The other female character in the screenplay is Crystal (Wu Chien Lien), the daughter of the evil Ray Lui. Sent to San Francisco for her college education, her father's minions keep close tabs on the young beauty. The CIA targets the girl as a way to get to the father. After his failed attempt to kill Lui, the CIA set up Yan [Lau] as the head of the strongest gang in San Francisco's Chinatown. He rescues the girl after she is kidnapped by a rival tong.

They fall in love with each other and her evil father accepts Lau as his son-in-law and makes him his #1 man. Ng Sin-Lin gives an honest, heart rendering performance as the daughter ultimately who realizes the evil nature of her father. This sequence makes up the middle third of the film and both Andy Lau and Ng Sin-Lin turn in remarkable performances as the mis-matched lovers. The sequence runs the gamut from the most touching love scenes to metal crunching car chases to bloody shoot-outs. It keeps the viewer on the edge of the seat.

With his great film *City on Fire*, Ringo Lam gained an international reputation and is single-handedly responsible for the Hollywood career of Quentin Tarantino. His latest feature, *The Adventurers*, is a nice addition to a body of work that includes *Aces Go Places 4*, *Prison on Fire*, and the great *Full Contact*.

PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL RAPIST

1994

Directed by Parkman Wong

Reviewed by Daniel Grissom

Portrait Of A Serial Rapist is a Hong Kong drama which attempts to take us into the case history of a local rapist/murderer a la Dr. Lamb. Like that film, the story here follows a police investigation, and later interrogation, interspersed with scenes of the main suspect's private life. *Portrait* is not, however, a Dr. Lamb rip-off. It merely seems to have used that film as an inspiration and model. (Ironically, if they had copied more of Dr. Lamb, they might have made a better film.)



The copy of this film that I watched was not subtitled and reviewing it would normally have been against my principles. I know, call me anal, but the main component of most films, this one included, is its narrative. Someone spent many hours writing the script and to deny it as a crucial element is to deny a portion of the filmmaker's intent. Especially when a film is as visually unremarkable as this.

The film, shot on video with what appears to be no budget, begins with a realistic, brutal rape. We don't see who the rapist is, but we are introduced to a suspect. This suspect is a chubby little pervert who likes to masturbate with women's underwear, expose himself, and grab women's butts. When the police detectives finally catch him, they subject him to hours of beatings and humiliation only to find out they've got the wrong guy -- he's cleared through DNA comparison. While the police are busy abusing the citizenry, our hero, the real rapist, scouts out women in the video store, has phone sex, and watches lots of porno (am I making too many lists here?). We also learn that the rapist lives with a woman. Who she is, I don't know (no subs, remember). One night

he rapes her in a particularly ugly scene. Eventually, though, he is caught. Of course, the cops torture him for a while and search his apartment. Some of these scenes are actually the cruelest in the film. When his DNA matches up, he's finally washed up. The film ends with a written message in Chinese (probably some warning like: "Raping people is bad, please do not try this at home."). Anyway, what does all this mean? Do they really believe there is a link between pornography and being a serial rapist? Are the police torture scenes suppose to give us some needed sense of retribution? The filmmakers also highlighted the fact the the rapist always wore a condom. Is this a fancy way of promoting safe sex to the sociopath crowd? I have no idea.

Overall, the film lacks a lot of substance. The plot, direction, and pace were all pretty amateurish. Strange considering the talent actually behind the film. I found myself wondering if these were truly professional filmmakers. The spirit is there though and that's a plus.

VENDETTA

1993

**Directed by Leung Sui Hung
Reviewed by Frank Kilzer**

Psychotic Hung Long with his young brother and sister, have just brutally killed a small family. Taking the car for their real purpose, they quickly arrive at a jewelry store where they smash open the cases. Upon leaving, the trio gets surprised by the police and flee with hostages. Meanwhile, plainclothes cop David (Ray Lui) is taking his pregnant wife, Kitty, to the hospital. He gets the call and joins his partner, Ming, as the rest of the police have the robbers trapped in a warehouse. The hostages do not live long, due to madman Hung.

As the criminals argue about how to escape, David and Ming confront them. Both siblings die in the gunfight that ensues, shot by David. After being scared shitless by a long fall with one of the bodies, he encounters and irate Hung. Though captured, Hung screams threats of revenge at David and his family.

A lot of stuff opens Leung Sui Hung's Vendetta and it looks like a "soon-to-escape-mad-killer" scenario. But not really, as the film shifts gears. Back at the hospital, a still-shaken-up David begins having visions of the young people he killed. He pursues the bloodied apparitions through the hospital until he runs into a doctor. He informs David that Kitty has had twins, a boy and a girl. Looking at them he sees red birthmarks on their foreheads, akin to the spectres' wounds. Reassured by a psychiatrist, David returns home with the twins.

About four years go by -- Hung is still jailed but has vengeance still boiling in his blood. He has crippled one of his guards during a rampage. As for the spotted twins, they seem to love their mother but are very cold to David. Accidents begin to happen to David and the twins seem to be happy to see him in pain. He becomes deaf in one ear in a mishap and the kids later almost shoot David with his own gun. Kitty refuses to believe that the children are possessed as David is now claiming. Hung does make his escape, of course. The police are on his trail but David loses him in a shanty town due to his bad ear. When Kitty is severely hurt by another accident, David takes action. He booby traps the house with tripwires. Putting the crying kids in their crib, he sets a fire bomb in their room. Now David is ready to face his adversaries.

Pluses in the film include a good cast that features Veronica Yip and veteran Kent Chung. Also the children are cute and nasty, without being precocious for



a change. The negatives are common special effects and a rather syrupy ending. There was no sign of evil spells earlier in the story and it only added confusion. The crux to Vendetta is -- are these kids really possessed? If true, is David willing to sacrifice his children to finally get Hung? Lack of story control help rate this film as only okay. Let's keep looking for better.

HUNTING LIST

1994

Directed by Chu Yin-Ping
Reviewed by Nick Chapman

Starring: Ray Lui Leung-Wai, Paul Chun Pui, Tan Lap-Man, Lo Suk-Fong, Tsui Yeuk-Huen, Guk Fung, Lau Hok-Yin

If you're a fan of John Woo's HK pics - particularly of their concern with issues of loyalty, betrayal, and (brotherly) love among the triads, as opposed to just their (wonderful) balletic action sequences - you might enjoy Hunting List. Or you might simply find it derivative in its handling of those themes, dull in general, and no comparison to Woo in its action sequences. A typical, not particularly awful, triad flick.

The film opens with a coda showing a trio of raggedy triad teens getting into a fight to protect a big brother. When one of them, the film's hero, Kit, kills a rival gang-member, he is sent into hiding in Taiwan. The movie really begins with his return to Hong Kong, now nattily dressed and sporting a beard, where he renews his friendship with the other two members of his teenage trio, now both prosperous and more hairy as well. One, Cramp, is a powerful figure in the gang headed by their old big brother, Lui. The other, Tai Hung, is a peripheral member of the gang who runs a bar.

But, as Cramp warns Kit in another Woo-derived thematic move, "It's changed. Everything's changed. You won't know our buddies now." Things begin to go wrong when Tai Hung has the fingers of one of his hands cut off for refusing to give up his bar to an important triad boss to pay a gambling debt. Following up on the trio's childhood pledge to take care of each other, Cramp takes a murderous revenge that precipitates a spiral of violence which leaves pretty much everyone dead.

Along the way, it is revealed that while in Taiwan, Kit has become an undercover agent of the "International Anti-Drug Unit," bringing in another Woo theme of loyalties divided between the gang and the law, and emphasizing Cramp's remark about not knowing your buddies. At one point, when reminded by his police superior that "No one knows them better than you," Kit moans, "I am one of them." He is torn between his job and his desire to aid and avenge his childhood friends. The surprise revelation of yet another undercover cop in Lui's gang serves to drive home the point and further fracture Kit's sense of his loyalties. (Kit's name, recalling the cop brother from *A Better Tomorrow* only serves as a heavy-handed reminder of this movie's debts.)

The film's Category III rating is proba-

bly not due to the tepid, even inept love scenes. One of these borders on the humorous. When lush and measured romantic music is used to underscore an image of frenzied intercourse, the clash of tempos is disconcerting. The Category III rating more likely is the result of an unpleasant rape scene, and Cramp's habit of laughing maniacally while pissing on the bodies of people he has just killed. One might say this is adding insult to injury, but since the injuries are fatal, it hardly seems to matter. What does matter is that Cramp's actions make it truly difficult to sympathize with him or respect Kit's apparent devotion.

Hunting List is shot predominately in a bluish light, filtered through smoky interiors - a visual combo that has been seen in a number of recent films from Hong Kong, but here serves only to point up the poor visuals of this movie. The direction is mostly unoriginal, boring and slow-paced, and the editing can be jarringly choppy at times. Fortunately, the action sequences are among the best of the film, though that isn't saying a whole lot.

One of the better action sequences begins with a three-way stand-off, between the police, Lui's gang, and the powerful triad boss, Master Two, and his henchmen. Lui's men have captured Kit and are torturing him when the cops burst in, guns pointing.

Then Master Two and his men burst in. After a tense moment, the cops inform Master Two who they are, to which the old and serious Master Two responds, in one of the film's few inspired lines of dialogue, "I hate cops." Soon enough the bullets start flying in the film's lengthiest shoot-out. This scene is of particular interest since it's the Beverly Hills Hotel shoot-out from *True Romance* all over again, right down to the feather's flying everywhere and one of the bad guys (in this case, Lui)

crying that he is badly hurt and needs an ambulance. This one sequence might make the film worth watching, if for no other reason than to compare it to the American / Tarantino version.

KAMEN RIDER J:

The Movie

1994

Directed by Keita Amamiya

Reviewed by Tim Merrill

From the beginning credits of Kamen Rider J, I wasn't expecting to be impressed. Actually I was expecting a Power Rangers rip off, but what do I know? I remember the days of Ultraman and the great rubber suit monsters of Toho studios, and I must say that Kamen Rider took me back a bit. Kamen Rider J is a new film, but you could easily fit it in there with all the Toho classics of the 60's and 70's. The effects may not be state of the art, but the film captures the spirit of going to the Saturday afternoon double bill as a kid at the local big screen theater.

The plot is simple. Koji is a teenager who takes pictures of nature, and spends his time documenting the destruction of the environment by man. One night while taking photographs of a mountain, Koji and his little sister Kana see a huge object rise out of the earth. The object is a spaceship controlled by the evil Fog Mother, a being that awakens from sleep after millions of years. The Fog Mother sends her three minions to capture Koji's sister, and sends him hurtling over a cliff. Koji dies, but is resurrected by the spirits of the earth. The earth spirits tell Koji that he has been chosen to possess the power of the Kamen Rider J, as he displayed his con-

cern for nature in his life. Koji's sidekick is Berry, a talking grasshopper. At first I thought the idea of the grasshopper as Koji's elemental was cute, but the idea becomes interesting. Before you know it, Koji is back as the Kamen Rider J, ready to save his sister, and kick Fog Mother butt. One by one, the Kamen Rider takes on the three evil henchmen of the fog mother. The first being morphs into a crocodile/lizard man and is promptly trounced, as is the moth woman, and the iron man afterwards.

Eventually, the film boils down to rescuing Kana from the spawn children of Fog Mother which are the ugliest critters since that kid in the Problem Child movies. Soon the Kamen Rider discovers that the spacecraft of Fog Mother is actually a living organism itself, and forces Kamen Rider to become colossal in size to battle it. The climactic battle is a lot of fun, and will keep most kids and gen-xers amused for more than five minutes. Some people might get a chuckle out of Kamen Rider's grasshopper costume, but when it comes time to kicking beastly butt, the Kamen Rider scores big. If Kamen Rider J turns out to be greatly successful, then I hope some of the younger generation will look at all the neat super hero stuff to come out of the 60's and the 70's like the Ultraman series. Just because something might be a little bit dated, that's no reason not to take a look at it and appreciate it.

The only real beef I have with Kamen Rider J, is that it's just too damn short. It seems more like a episode than an actual movie, but if this is just an example of things to come with the Kamen Rider series, I definitely look forward to more.

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**compiled and
arranged by
Francine Dali and
Scott Williams**



The Many Faces Of **MAGGIE CHEUNG**



NIGHTMARE IN SZECHUAN

1995

Directed by Li Qimin
Reviewed by Dan Edmonds

If anyone had ever told me I would (or even could) enjoy a psychological thriller in which I was incapable of understanding even a single word of the dialogue, I'd have flatly denied the possibility; I guess it is nice to be wrong every so often. In fact, my utter inability to comprehend Mandarin might well have enhanced my enjoyment of this well-crafted film, even if it did render a couple of events inexplicable.

Nightmare in Szechuan opens with what we soon discover is a dream, evidently a traumatic flashback. It's a prototypical dark and stormy night, and the creepy music makes it clear to any audience that something foul is afoot. A man tosses and turns in his bed, as does a baby who dozes in a nearby cradle. Suddenly, the loud echoes of heavy footsteps resound as someone else enters the bedroom holding a pillow.

Just as the figure looms over the bed, the man awakens and screams, only to be smothered to death by the pillow-



wielding figure over the protests of a screaming baby and a howling storm. A woman awakens, shocked by her nightmare, and the opening credits appear.

The dream ends out to be the impetus for our protagonist, a simpering woman whose every action is punctuated by a wail, a moan or a swoon, to return to her hometown in an attempt to discover the dream's origin. She soon deduces that she is the infant in the dream, and the victim her father; who, then, is the murderer? Her suspicious step-father? The nervous gardener? His eager son? Her servile mother? Or the mysterious midget who lives somewhere in the family's sprawling house?

The eerie suspense is maintained beautifully in a number of fashions. The cinematography is frequently disconcerting, sometimes juxtaposing different shots to produce strange effects (for example, in the opening nightmare, shots of the restless torso of the victim are alternated with shots of the baby's kicking legs, momentarily creating the appearance that the baby's legs

are, in fact, the man's), sometimes shooting at unusual angles (there is a stunning scene in a later dream sequence where the protagonist is running down a huge staircase in a flowing white gown and high heels and the camera work almost makes her appear to be running up the stairs), sometimes giving

long shots of dark and harrowing cityscapes (a cobblestone street late at night lit only by red lanterns, loud footsteps reverberating). Startling close-ups of contorted stone masks often illicit another scream or whimper from the protagonist. Both the music and the sound effects also help to keep tension running high. Especially common is the heavy use of reverb on the footfalls of various characters, especially during dream sequences and at night.

The film does have its drawbacks, especially for someone who isn't a native speaker of Mandarin. Because the suspense is mostly psychological, several large dialogues which would doubtless greatly enhance the complexity of the movie are completely lost. There is a near total absence of any sort of violence or gore, elements which, after all, transcend any sort of linguistic barrier. Similarly, there isn't even a tiny bit of sex (though some might find the timid protagonist in her sheer, billowing white night-gown appealing). There are also several holes in the plot that are quite difficult to fill in without dialogue; the midget (who, in his first appearance, thanks to the miracle of heavy reverb on his footsteps, can easily be mistaken for a tap-dancing child) is especially puzzling, and his exact place in the plot is difficult at best to ascertain. There are a few amusing slip-ups (at one point, for example, our heroine turns on the switch for her bedside lamp and the room is suddenly flooded with light but the lamp itself stays dark) as well, but overall, *Nightmare in Szechuan* is a very well-made film with astonishing cinematography, effective use of sound, and a plot that is interesting enough to make up for the incomprehensible dialogue.



BLACK LIZARD

1968

Directed by Kinji Fukasaku

Reviewed by John Wright

The past two years has been marked by an explosion in the popularity of drag-based or inspired films. The success of *Priscilla*, *To Wong Foo*, and *The Birdcage* are strong indicators that American audiences are ready to digest non-traditional gender roles along with their fat-laden popcorn. Apparently we're trailing the Japanese in this aspect as well as in our collective math scores. 1968 was notable for mini-skirts and fluorescent body paint, candy colored wigs and buff love-slaves, all evident in abundance in Japan's classic *The Black Lizard*. Romance, intrigue, the fabulous Star Of Egypt diamond, false eyelashes!

The *Black Lizard* brought renowned female-impersonator Akihiro Maruyama her first starring role, playing it straight (yeah, right) as the crime baroness namesake of the title. (So-named for a tattoo on her lovely upper right arm. Racy!) Adapted for the screen by the notable gay author Yukio Mishima, who later committed suicide by ritual *seppuku*. Coincidence? Hmmmmmm. Anyway, fortunately for us, something is lost in the translation because this thing plays somewhere to the left of *Valley Of The Dolls* and smack-dab in the middle of Almodovar's psychedelic palette.

The plot goes something like this: a famous Japanese detective, Akechi, stumbles upon the nefarious night club/crime lair/go-go procurement operation of the evil Black Lizard (aforementioned drag queen). Oddly attracted to her feminine wiles, Akechi has no idea that she is plotting to steal the Star Of Egypt diamond, a golf ball sized bauble that only a drag queen could love.

Akechi has been retained by a jewelry broker who owns the diamond and is also friends with the Lizard, unaware of her reptilian chiffon-draped ways. During her pursuit of the diamond, the Black Lizard also becomes enamored of Sanae, the jeweler's lovely daughter. She decides to up the ante and kidnap Sanae, using her to get the diamond. But she has no intention of returning Sanae. No, she wants to whisk her away to her private island/crime lair/wax museum in order to turn her into a "lovedoll." (Where aforementioned screenwriter Mishima has also been installed in an uncredited role.)

Does love conquer all? Is the virginal Sanae saved? Will the evil Black Lizard do a triumphant crime dance accompanied by tumbling costumed dwarfs? Good questions. But you'll have to rent the movie. I've given enough away. Suffice it to say that this film is truly a camp classic, and no collection would be complete without it. Akihiro Maruyama's over-the-top yet convincing portrayal of "...a true romanticist, who believes crime should wear a gorgeous gown with a train twelve feet long, like the primordial dreams of lizards," (their dialogue, not mine) is not to be missed. You'll love it! I swear.

famous HK filmstar who is haunted by the death of his family at the hands of a blackmailer. Jacky Cheung plays Frankie, a dead ringer for Chan, who drinks too much and has lost his abilities as a great martial artist. Chingmy Yau plays an aggressive reporter trying to catch Frankie using a double, which is something all his fans know he never does, according to reputation. Frankie is surrounded by sycophants, particularly his manager and his father who proound the myth of the world renowned moviemaker. Jet Li portrays an former military man whose wife and child were killed by the master villain known as Doctor. Li's character is called Bold, a man consumed by revenge for the murder of his family. Two years pass and Bold is now a civilian employed as a stunt double for Hong Kong's biggest star, Frankie, who is also his cousin.

In his review [published on the Internet] Michael Schlock wrote that "High Risk is a hilarious, fast paced movie that doles out a full dose of Jet Li, AND a full dose of Jacky Cheung, and more than a little Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee (though neither appears in this movie.) Somehow, Wong Jing and action director Corey Yuen Kwai manage to cram about three films worth of entertainment into one movie."

Besides being a take on Chan and Lee, tribute is also paid to various American made films which have played to big audiences in Hong Kong; for example, Speed, Blown Away, and Renny Harlin's Die Hard 2 and Cliffhanger. In fact, literal translations of High Risk and Die Hard are very similar.

High Risk contains bits and pieces of all these films, yet the performances of the principle actors keep the film moving at a wonderful pace. This is the best film I've seen Jet Li in since Last Hero In China. Jing knows how to utilize the skills of Li.

HIGH RISK

1995

Directed by Wong Jing
Reviewed by John Crawford

Jet Li's newest film is a slam-bang action-adventure. Hong Kong's most prolific director working at this time, Wong Jing has put together a sort of homage to the great Jackie Chan with a tale of the bodyguard/stunt double of a

Last Hero, also directed by Wong Jing, was a blatant rip-off of Tsui Hark's "OUATIC" series. In High Risk, Jing frames the stoic Jet Li in ways that display this performer's excellent skills. Jacky Cheung also fares very well under action director Corey Yeun Kwai. His take-off of Jackie Chan's and Bruce Lee's martial arts skills is quite an impressive display. Wong Jing's fast-paced editing style is most effective here.

appealing heroine he makes too. He lives most of his life as a "gay bar boy" and could easily pass for a Japanese pop star of today...female pop star. He is tormented by visions of death and despair (real or imagined is unclear at first), spurred by the loss of his father at a young age. (About two-thirds into the film, the action cuts to an interview with Peter (as actor) commenting on the similarities between himself and the character of Eddie. Odd? Yes. But believe me, this is only one of the weird goings-on within this gem of a film.)

There are scenes of what appear to be violent newsreel footage and other strange randomness intercut with the actual storytelling...which is by no means linear. Matsumoto flashes back, flashes forward, hints of things to come, hints of things that may or may not have already happened and somehow pulls all of them together into a plot that makes much more sense than our own summer blockbuster, Mission: Impossible.

Shot in black and white, many will be put off by the intense editing and surreal footage married to a soundtrack that falls somewhere between Disney World and Dark Shadows. But at no point during the movie was I able to pull my eyes away. Even the most trivial (seeming) scene was mesmerising. My only regret is that with its strobe-editing, quick cuts and extreme close-ups, I was unable to see this on the big screen...tripping.

For example, there is an extended pot smoking sequence which ends with a shot of a Beatles poster on the wall followed by a scene of twisting, dancing, half-naked male and female revelry to a song that seemed like Dick Dale meets Current 93. The drugs, drags, violence, and femme fatales all combine into a juicy adaptation of a classic that may never have had such a glorious interpretation.

There are also interviews with "people on the street" about being "gay bar boys"

FUNERAL PROCESSION OF ROSES

1969

Directed by Toshio Matsumoto
Reviewed by Scott Williams

I have seen the future of "avant garde" cinema and it's name is, of course, the past. The film in question was made in 1969 and is one of the most fascinating and disturbing films I have ever had the honor of viewing. Director Toshio Matsumoto's Funeral Procession Of Roses is that film. From opening sequence to ending shot, I can honestly say I have never seen anything like it.

This ambitious production follows the basic story of Oedipus Rex transplanted to the 60s Japanese underground gay scene. It deals with the rivalry between Madam, the head "gay bar boy" at Club June and Eddie, the much younger and seemingly "fairest of them all." (The "gay bar boys," or transvestites, are the appeal of the lounges that cater to discreet gay gentlemen.) Plus, throw into the mix the man who is loving them both and you have the makings of quite an explosive little pink triangle.

Eddie (did you get it yet?) is played quite convincingly by Peter. And quite an

as well as interviews with the druggies about the effect the pot has on them. All done in standard headshot interview style. Plus, to add once again to the weirdness, notable Japanese film critic Nagaharu Yodogawa appears near the end of the film and gives a brief review of the film and its merits directly to us, the lucky viewers. Is this pretentiousness or great in-joke? Who cares, it works within the context in which it is set.

An amazing cast, that includes Osamu Ogasawara, Yoshimi Jo and Emiko Azuma, along with inspired (if not drug-induced) direction help create a world that is at once repugnant and enticing within alternating frames of footage. There are scenes that at no time seem related to the story (or to what the director may want us to know) until later, thinking back on the film or viewing it for the third time as I did. Sadly, I can not gush enough over this find. Thanks to subtitles by Thomas Weisser and Yuko Mihara Weisser, this masterpiece now holds a place among my favorite films. But even without dialogue, *Funeral* would still be a crowning moment in cinematic history for its visuals alone.

Basically you know the story...you may even remember how it ends but at one point in the film a would-be avant garde director has just screened his latest work for some of our friends ("I know it's weird.") and the dialogue says it all:

- "I've never seen anything like this before..."

- "Do you call this underground?"

"Maybe..."

- "The movie is like turning on your brain and leaving the windows open and leaving the door open like Otto Jewel..."

- "You mean Otto Muehl..."

"Even if you don't understand the movie, doesn't your body feel something?"

- "Yes. Like being high..."

Which not only describes the film within a film but *Funeral* as well. And I say, yes. Exactly. And highly recommended.

ANGEL DUST

1994

Directed by Toshihiro Ishii
Reviewed by Steve Puchalski

Films about serial killers are a dime a dozen nowadays, but this Japanese entry is so seductive that it makes *Seven* look like a crude home movie, while further proving that Toshihiro Ishii is one of Japan's most dynamic directors. Unfortunately, little of Ishii's work has made it to the United States, leaving most Americans in the dark about his disturbed cinematic charms.

In addition to numerous commercials and music videos (including Einsturzende Neubauten's *1/2 Mensch*), Ishii's earliest, most brain-addling films include *Crazy Thunder Road* (1980) and *Burst City* (1981), two unsparingly amoral visions of urban chaos, now and in the future. His hyper-kinetic black comedy, *The Crazy Family* [*Gyakufunsha-Kazoku*] (1984) had a "typical" Japanese family unit going unquietly insane from the pressures of everyday life and although given a nominal US release by New Yorker Films, it quickly vanished from art-house screens and has yet to appear on video. It's been nearly a decade since Ishii's last foray into features (cranking out shorts like *The Master Of Shiatsu* and *Tokyo Blood* instead), but it's worth the wait, with Ishii putting his early, maniacal edge on the backburner, for this tale of murder and manipulation.

There's a serial killer riding the rails of Tokyo's Yamanote Line train. And every Monday at exactly 6 PM, during the height of rush hour, an unsuspecting young woman is killed when a poisoned hypo is jammed into her chest. Since the police are baffled by this type of seemingly random crime, enter Kaho Minami

as Setsuko Suma, a criminal psychologist who hopes to weasel her way into the killer's mindset. Things begin to spiral out of control when she eventually taps into the isolation and despair that was a part of each victim's personality, and goes so far as to set herself up as a potential victim.

This is more than your standard "search for a psycho" yarn though, because Ishii is equally keen on exposing mankind's overall destructive nature, as personified by an old college beau of Suma's, Rei Aki

(Takeshi Wakamatsu), who now runs a spiffy (albeit controversial) deprogramming clinic for brain-fried victims of religious cults. As if Suma didn't have enough problems already tracking down this killer, she soon falls prey to Aku's mind games and gets sucked back into a destructive relationship. Needless to add, the instant we hear Aku's crackpot theories ("Insanity and death are stages for greater possibilities -- stepping stones to higher sanity."), even a drooling idiot would realize this guy is wacko enough to know more about the murders than he's admitting.



--ANGEL DUST director Toshihiro Ishii--

On the debit side, the script is heavy on the psycho-babble and stumbles during the wrap-up. Yet even if Ishii plays all his best cards early on, he can be forgiven in light of the film's successes, including bizarre plot twists, a gnawing sense of despair, and several very dynamic sequences. Best of all are the moments just before each murder, when Suma and the police know that someone is going to die but are helpless to stop it from occurring.

If you're at all familiar with Ishii's early work, the pic will seem oddly low-key at first glance -- but don't let it fool you -- because even if his style has gotten a touch more restrained over the years, his filmmaking is still fueled by an undeniable creepiness. And even if he sidesteps the story's more graphic possibilities (which will undoubtedly disappoint folks only interested in cheap thrills 'n bloody babes), Ishii banks on his uncanny ability to disorient the viewer -- making us feel lost and confused as any of the characters. It's during these moments that this unsettling thriller stabs straight into the heart of madness and sticks in your memory long afterward.

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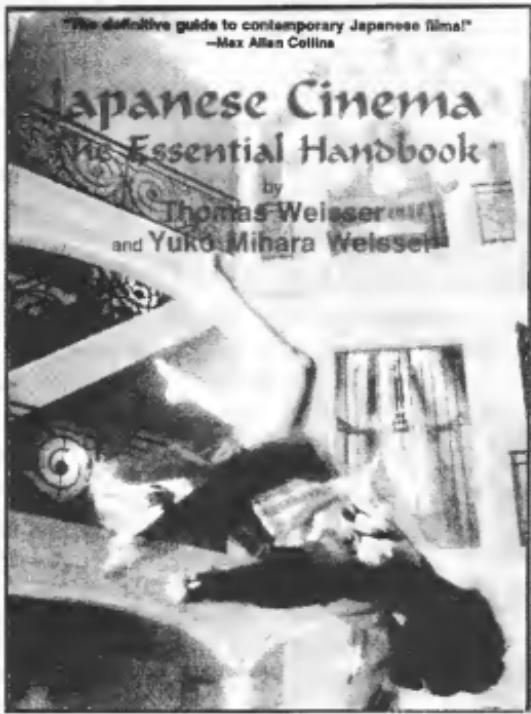
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ANGEL GUTS (1978-1995+)

[Tensi No Harawata] 7 Episodes
Takashi Ishii / Nikkatsu Studios

Initially, Takashi Ishii had a difficult time breaking into motion pictures. Like many of his contemporaries, he wanted to make movies because he *loved* movies. But Ishii didn't particularly love the compulsory education requirements necessary for getting into the business. He did poorly in college, even failing his film production courses. He blamed it on asthma problems

In 1972, Ishii began drawing. He put together an adult *manga* [comic book] called *Angel Guts* [Tensi No Harawata] which saw publication the following year. The darkly surreal images caught the attention of Nikkatsu Studios who hired Ishii to write a screenplay based on the manga. *Angel Guts: High School Coed* was released in 1978 and became a surprise hit. This began a series of six films including *Angel Guts: Red Porno* (a 1981 thriller by *Evil Dead Trap* director Toshiharu Ikeda) plus two movies directed by Ishii himself.

The *Angel Guts* films (as with most everything else by Ishii) are instantly recognizable due to a preoccupation with water and, like the mangas that influenced them, they are filled with an excessive quota of rain. Any excuse for dripping water or any kind of liquid coating is snatched by the filmmaker to create a glistening, colorful shroud of evil. Often these watery images begin harmlessly [*i.e.*, a shot of a drain during a shower] but become quite horrifying as they slowly mix with large helpings of blood and gore. This is a favorite technique, used four different times in Ishii's self-directed *Red Lightning* (1994).

Besides the well-written Ishii scripts, the series benefits immeasurably from the vision of its strong directors, *Chusei Sone* (*Erotic Sisters* [1972]), *Noboru Tanaka* (*Walker In The Attic* [1976]) and, of course, *Toshiharu Ikeda* (*Evil Dead Trap* [1988]). Conservative critics have dismissed these films as "rape thrillers appealing to the most unpleasant of instincts" but the movies are, more accurately, darkly sinister works of exploitative art.

The series includes:

1) ANGEL GUTS:

HIGH SCHOOL COED (1978)

[*Jokousei Tensi No Harawata*]

director: Chusei Sone

Machiko Ootani - Sansho Fukami

** 1/2

Tensions flare and violence erupts in a suburban high school after a pretty cheerleader is gang raped by a delinquent gang.

2) ANGEL GUTS:

RED CLASSROOM (1979)

[*Tensi No Harawata Akei Kyoshitsu*]

director: Chusei Sone

Yuuki Mizuhara - Keizo Kanie

*** 1/2

Muraki (Keizo Kanie), a writer for a man's magazine, is doing a feature on a starlet (Yuuki Mizuhara) in a cult porno film. He becomes obsessed with finding her, but then discovers that she was really an unwilling victim in the too real classroom rape flick.

3) ANGEL GUTS:

NAMI (1980)

[*Tensi No Harawata: Nami*]

director: Noboru Tanaka

Eri Kanuma - Takeo Chii

Nami (Eri Kanuma) is a *repowriter* (Japanization for field reporter) doing an article on rape for a woman's magazine. In her investigation she meets a man writing a similar *expose'* for a man's magazine. The two decide to combine notes and they discover a mysterious serial-like pattern.



-- ANGEL GUTS: Nami

4) ANGEL GUTS:

RED PORNO (1981)

[Tenshi No Harawata: Akai Inga]

director: Toshiharu Ikeda

Jun Izumi - Masahiko Abe

A department store employee is fired because she's been moonlighting in an adult bookstore. Depressed, she finds herself flirting with one of the customers in the porn shop. She knows this man may not be good for her, but she gives in to the temptation. This results in a heart-pounding thriller nestled firmly inside the ugly underbelly of urban horror. Stylishly directed in amazingly garish colors.

5) ANGEL GUTS:

RED DIZZINESS (1988)

[Tenshi No Harawata: Akai Memai]

director: Takashi Ishii

Mayako Katsuragi - Naoto Takenaka

A night-shift hospital nurse, Nami (Mayako Katsuragi), is viciously raped after she leaves work. When the attacker threatens to kill her, she manages to break away and dashes into the path of an oncoming car. Muraki (Naoto Takenaka) swerves just in time, grazing the girl, not seriously hurting her. They begin a relationship, but it's plagued with nami's "blood" nightmares of that fateful night. The film crescendos into a surprisingly grim finale with hero Muraki getting killed. This was an early role by actor Naoto Takenaka who found international popularity as *Edogawa Rampo* [Mystery Of Rampo] (1995).

6) ANGEL GUTS:

RED LIGHTNING (1994)

[Tenshi No Harawata: Akai Senko]

director: Takashi Ishii

Maiko Kawakami - Jinpachi Nezu

Noriko Hayami - Shingo Tsurumi

A female magazine designer agrees to assist as cameraman during the filming of a *pinku eiga*. The brutal rape scene unleashes distant, better forgotten, memories and she quits the project. Strange things start happening to her. And before long she wakes up in bed with a complete stranger who has left blood all over the place. He's also quite dead.

7) ANGEL GUTS:

NIGHT IS FALLING AGAIN (1995)

[Tenshi No Harawata:

Yoru Ga Mata Kuru]

director: Takashi Ishii

Yui Natsukawa - Jinpachi Nezu

Nami's husband is a Narcotics Agent on a dangerous undercover mission. One day he turns up dead. But instead of being honored as a cop who died in the line of duty, he's denounced as a member of the drug syndicate. Nami wants to clear her husband's name so

*-- ANGEL GUTS: Night Is Falling Again*

she goes into the underground. But her enthusiasm is quickly offset by a vicious gang rape after which she tries to commit suicide. Undercover cop, Muraki (played by Jinpachi Nezu once again) saves her and they continue the investigation together. In a surprise ending, Nami discovers that her husband was killed by Muraki to protect his cover.

THE SELLING OF JACKIE CHAN



BY
TONY LANE

Jackie Chan wants to be a star in the US. He tried before with the Cannonball Run series, The Protector, and the very forgettable Big Brawl. This time he is hoping to catch the hearts of the moviegoers here with Rumble In The Bronx and his latest effort, Police Story 4: First Strike.

While both of the above named films are far better than those early efforts it still remains to be seen if he will catch on. This last summer Rumble opened big. It was the first time an Asian film ever hit number one at the box office on its first week out. New Line Cinema, who released it, made sure the public knew who Chan is. If you were somehow not exposed to this media blitz you must have been hiding under a rock or in a fallout shelter.

There were magazine interviews, TV spots, TV promos, and even live chats on the internet. Through all of it Chan came off as an open and friendly guy, very approachable and he seemed to sincerely want us to like him.

But look at others who have tried here. John Woo is a good example. He is a very talented director but his Broken Arrow and Hard Target with Jean Claude Van Damme show no evidence of this. Both films met with a rather tepid reception. But those films were made here. They were not done on friendly soil, where he, or Chan, know their way around. The restraints in Hollywood and the schedules are very different. A director on a Hollywood production has a small army of producers and assistants telling him what he can and cannot do --

a far cry from Hong Kong where they do it the way they want to.

Chan, luckily, made *First Strike* and *Rumble* on his type of budget and with his methods. Even though *First Strike* seems more Hollywood in structure and pacing than his other films, it still stays pretty close to the Chan formula of fights and gags, often going on a bit too long. Fortunately for us, audiences here will get a truer flavor of what a HK film is really like rather than something translated through a Hollywood movie mill.

Needless to say, rumors are flying. There has been a lot of talk on the internet about an upcoming pairing of Chan with Wesley Snipes for a film called *Confucius Jones*. In it the two supposedly play long lost brothers. The reaction of most Chan-fans is that they would be as about as anxious to see this one as they would be to sit in front of Pee Wee Herman at a showing of *Showgirls*. The idea is a weak one and Snipes' career is on the wane. Chan could do a lot better just being himself and NOT pairing off with some Hollywood name. He is the focus of his films. Folks go to them to see what he is going to do and watch him almost get killed time after time in bizarre stunts. I talked to some of my contacts at Universal about this project but none had even heard the rumors I had. I hope it remains that way ..

New Line Cinema plans to release *First Strike* on January 10. This is almost a month earlier than their first announcement for the film. This is a healthy plan since there seems to be a desire to see more of him since *Rumble*. They have also made a deal for five of his yet unfilmed features. They also have the rights to *Thunderbolt* and the first three *Police Story* films. This is a good commitment and shows that more of the big houses are noticing the desire of people to see films from over there.

Video stores are stocking as many of his older films as they can and many,

especially those in the public domain, are being re-released as fast as they can be duped by companies like Magnum Films in North Hollywood. Magnum is even offering a dubbed version of one of Chan's newer films, *Twin Dragons*.

Miramax is releasing *Drunken Master 2* in August and there is talk that they have also picked up *Armour Of God 1 & 2*, *Supercop*, and *Crime Story*. I expect most of these to be released direct to tape. As to whether they will be subtitled or dubbed remains to be seen. I have even heard that both New Line and Miramax have bought some of the same titles!

Other Asian stars are starting to be noticed also. Quentin Tarantino is supposed to be bringing out some of Jet Li's pictures under his Rolling Thunder banner and there is a lot about Chow Yun Fat doing everything from TV to a Broadway version of *The King And I*. Having watched Chow dance in *God Of Gamblers Returns*, I have my doubts.



-- Chan in *Police Story 4: First Strike*

What exactly does all this mean? Are Hong Kong films going to be the flavor of the month and as quickly forgotten as any new fad? Is there going to be an overkill with adventurous video store shelves stocked with titles that drop in price weekly?

I would say that this is a very possible outcome. These films are not going to appeal to everybody. There are some very good ones out there and some (*Fantasy Mission Force*) that I could not be forced to sit through again. What we will get here first are the ones that nobody in Hong Kong cares about. They know what the good ones are and they will hold on to them, expecting more money once a market is established. The cheap deals, the ones distributors will go for quickly because of the price, could as easily turn off the public as they could spark an interest. Most distributors won't be looking for good or bad. They will want a good price.

A good example of this is Japanimation. *Robotech*, *Starblazers*, and *Akira* caught on here and suddenly everybody was trying to get into the market. That market has degenerated to porn and lesser efforts. The Japanese started to make animated films with a US audience in mind and are now cranking out a far inferior product.

If HK producers take the same heading, they will be sending us a lot of Category III trash (*and we'll be happy for them as well! -- Editor*) and really "good" films will be just something one only hears about in the pages of obscure magazines or as fan buzz.

Time, not logic, will sort all of this out. Chan has a good chance of being established here as the major talent that he is. Audiences will like *First Strike* and will want to see more of him. This also depends on what of his previous efforts the US is offered in between new projects. One can only hope for the best.



-- Jackie Chan sets his sights on the US --

The Encyclopedia Of Martial Arts Movies



An Interview with
the authors,
**Ric Meyers and
Karen & Bill Palmer**

The following is an interview with the authors (editors) of *The Encyclopedia Of Martial Arts Movies*. The book is an exhaustive look at these films including capsule reviews and ratings. It is a must for all fans of the genre as it is the ultimate kung fu coffee table book. It is available from Scarecrow Press for \$69.50.

Karen Palmer: I didn't get into the martial arts until Bill got me started 18 years ago, and I've been teaching for 11 years now. I had seen some genre films in the late '60s and '70s, in the movies and on TV. But, it wasn't until the early 1980s, when Bill and I purchased our first VCR, that we were really able to start reviewing the films.

ACC: To Bill and Karen - - Which came first - the martial arts as instruction or as film?

Bill Palmer: I've been studying the martial arts most of my life, beginning in my preteen years when I learned kata in the back alleys of NYC from my friends. I started to study the Japanese martial arts at the Kokushi Budo Institute with Professor Nobuyoshi Higashi 23 years ago, and I've been teaching for over 20 years.

ACC: What is it specifically about martial arts movies that captured your interest?

KP: The exhilaration felt while watching the really good films was overpowering. They celebrated the human spirit and the need to strive for excellence. The stories generally dealt with the eternal question of good vs. evil, and the importance of honor.

Having a background in ballet and gymnastics, I was also drawn to the films by the grace, fluid movement, choreography, and an appreciation of the obvi-

ous amount of training by the stars.

BP: As a full-time martial arts instructor, I found the films to provide an unprecedented way of learning about the many different styles without "walking down two paths." Even though many of the "styles" depicted either didn't really exist or were moves taken from other styles, their value wasn't lessened.

Ric Meyer: Although I saw Enter The Dragon and 5 Fingers Of Death in college, I was formally introduced to modern martial arts movies five years later by actor/toy designer/comic book artist-writer Larry Hama and his then-girlfriend Linda Sampson. I was in Larry's Marvel Comics office complaining that the movies and television shows that were adapted from comics didn't capture their spirit. They decided to show me how it could be done, first by taking me to the now-defunct Bleeker Street Cinema where Baby Cart In The Land Of Demons was playing, then further down to the also now-defunct Canal Street Cinema where Drunken Monkey In A Tiger's Eye was playing. By the time it was all over, my eyes were scraping the screen and my jaw was dragging the floor. The latter, especially, seemed like a comic book come to human life.

ACC: *The book, THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MARTIAL ARTS MOVIES, must have been an amazing feat to undertake. What possessed you to do so?*

BP: One night about 14 years ago, the 3 of us were having dinner when Ric showed us a list of 15 kung fu films available for rental via mail order. I was overwhelmed. Ric is one amazing writer and his previous books on mystery, science-fiction, and exploitation films fascinated me, and couldn't think of anyone more suited to write about this genre.

KP: Bill and I initially started gathering information on the films in the early '80s, mainly because there just wasn't any information available about them. The genre was very confusing since many films had more than one title; and so many stars had pseudonyms.

In 1985, Bill and I began to review the films and show clips on the cable TV show, "Martial Art World" (MSG Network). By 1994, with help from our friends, we had gathered information on 3,300 or so films. Since so many fans of the genre had so many questions, we decided it was time to do a book that focused solely on the martial art films themselves and answered as many questions as possible on the subject.

ACC: *What were some of the most difficult obstacles in compiling such a list of films?*

KP: It was difficult to find all the information we wanted, especially about the old films. Not many sources existed. Another problem was finding the films - and the time to watch them.

BP: Other than trying to obtain the film's credits (many are not translated), the Asian names! Many of the actors have Western names or pseudonyms causing some confusion. Also, a number of the video companies have retitled the films, creating a nightmare of alternate titles.

ACC: *The book also seems to be kind of a tease as most American viewers would have a hard time actually finding many (or most) of the films you recommend. What advice would you give to them?*

RM: Find and subscribe to any of the many martial arts movie fanzines -- including ACC, of course -- being published today. They usually have ads for

companies who will find what you want (if it's available and sometimes if it's not).

BP: Visit your local Chinatown; check out the many mail-order companies; use the Internet to find like-minded people with whom to trade. Martial arts movies are still being made, so there's very little chance that fans will run out of films to watch.

KP: For the real hard to find films, trading is probably the only way you'll get to see them. The copy may not be great, but at least you can see the movie. I should, however, inject a word of caution here. Anyone thinking about trading should be careful about who they trade with. Otherwise, an unscrupulous person might take your copy and foist a poor quality bootleg on an unsuspecting public.

ACC: *Do you feel that martial arts films in general will make a comeback here in the US? What do you feel happened to make the genre all but disappear after being so popular for a short time? (I am not including the "art house"-type circuit that a few larger cities have that do show the films.)*

BP: A comeback? They never left. But, no. Not like the explosion in the early '70s. Martial arts are now part of our culture. Hollywood movies, TV shows, even commercials depict martial arts. Our cinematic fight scenes have changed from the "John Wayne" brawl to a more aesthetically pleasing encounter.

I don't think the genre disappeared. In the beginning there was the serious, generally historical, kung fu film, in which one person (or group) would battle the forces of evil. Then the comedic kung fu film, epitomized by Jackie Chan. Next, there was what has been called "New Wave," lots of guns and stunts rather than hand-to-hand combat. We are

now enjoying a revival of the straight kung fu movie.

In addition, the martial arts used in the films are going through cycles. Karate was the thing in the '60s, then kung fu in the '70s. The late '70s saw the acrobatic aspects of Chinese kung fu as choreographed by Kuo Chui, Lu Peng and Chiang Sheng. The early '80s brought us ninjutsu and kickboxing, and now thanks to Steven Seagal, aikido is becoming popular.

ACC: *How did you determine which films received a star rating and/or extensive synopses?*

KP: Only films that were seen and reviewed received a star rating. How can you rate a movie you didn't see? As for the reviews, I can only speak for myself. The length often depended on how much I liked, or disliked the film. My reviews also tended to be longer for films with very interesting, complicated, or convoluted plots.

RM: Given the scope of the project and the several writers involved, it was ultimately "every writer for him/her-self." But because Billy and Karen reviewed the majority of titles, the tome mostly took on their personality and p.o.v. My own few paltry reviews were standard "Ric-views," in that that entire movie, not just the fighting is important to me.

ACC: *As for the star rating, was it a combined co-author decision or did whoever wanted to review the film have sole rights in its rating? The star rating is geared more toward the actual fighting. What criteria do you use in rating the fight scenes and can a film be awful but be rated high solely for its fight scene content?*

BP: Generally, we agreed on star ratings, and yes, it is geared more toward

the actual fighting. That's what the genre's all about. If Karen and I kept a film for repeated viewings, it couldn't be rated lower than 2 1/2 stars. A truly astounding film, with superior direction, choreography, acting, and production, such as *Master Killer*, *Legendary Weapons of China*, or Jet Li's *Shaolin Temple*, would get a 4-star rating. There are plenty of "awful" films that we rate high solely for its fight content. For example, *Seven Grandmasters* might be called awful; it has few sets, nothing much in costumes, acting and direction, but it's wall-to-wall fighting and the choreography is superb.

KP: For the most part, the star ratings were a combination of the co-authors decisions. However, if only one of us saw the film, that person made their own decision. I must admit, however, that since Bill and I did edit the book, we had the final say on the films we all saw.

The fight scenes were rated on the quality of the techniques, the grace and skill of the martial artists, and the choreography. The ratings, however, were not based solely on the fight scenes. Production values, script, and acting were also taken into consideration. If the fights were great, but the movie stank - we said so in the review and the star rating reflected it. Generally, however, the best films have the best fighting.

ACC: *What, in your opinion, is responsible for the continued success and appeal of the genre?*

KP: These films are more popular now than ever. Although martial art movies usually only appeared in Chinatown or in the "art" houses you mentioned, now they're popping up all over TV, especially on cable and pay-per-view channels.

More and more people are beginning to feel the excitement and see the beauty in these films. Some of our friends just couldn't understand our interest in these

films until we compared the skills of the martial artists to Olympic gymnasts.

And, now more than ever, kids have become very interested in the films, a trend which really took off after the release of *"Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles."* Just check the listings in TV guide for all the daytime shows since *"Power Rangers"* became such a hit. And that doesn't include all the adult TV shows using martial arts. It's obvious that the trend is continuing.

BP: Video tape! Seriously, the appeal is the same as it was for the gladiatorial bouts of ancient Greece and Rome, and the somewhat gentler, present-day boxing matches. In fact, fight sequences have been with us, in the U.S., since 1894, when Thomas Edison filmed Gentleman Jim Corbett's boxing match against Peter Courtney.

We're fascinated by competition and generally root for the under-dog. If a smaller, weaker individual can overcome a larger, stronger opponent, well then, so can we. Ever watch kids after they see a martial arts film? They're jumping and kicking and punching the air. The film invigorated them, as it does us.

RM: The mind craves two things: intellectual and emotional stimulation...food for the brain and soul, as it were. Excellence of thought feeds the intellect, while excellence of action feeds the emotions. Clearly, masters of martial arts are doing the best possible things with their bodies outside of sex, so it's natural that the viewer respond with admiration and a feeling of exhilaration. Special effects can only do so much. They create supermen but audiences know they are watching fantasy. But kung-fu masters are *supra-men* and women. They are actually doing these amazing things right before our eyes (which is why kung-fu is always more thrilling than wire-assisted stuff). And, as *supra-heroes*, they are fighting for us,

both literally and figuratively. Superheroes can only save us in fiction. You can save yourself in reality with martial arts.

Besides, it looks really cool.

ACC: *Is there one person or film to whom you believe the genre owes the most?*

BP: Other than Bruce Lee? Some would say Jackie Chan, or Liu Chia-liang, or Chang Cheh. How about Kwan Tak-hing, whose career amounts for nearly 100 Wong Fai-hung films and without whom the genre might have died decades before ever being introduced to the Western world. Or Jimmy Wang Yu whose cinematic fights were never top-notch, but who brought a new level of excitement and energy to the genre. Or maybe studio heads Raymond Chow (of Golden Harvest) and Sir Run Run Shaw (of Shaw Brothers) who decided to sell the TV, movie and video rights to America.

KP: It has to be Bruce Lee; there's no doubt about it! His films radically changed and improved the genre. But, two other masters should also be mentioned: Liu Chia-liang, who gave us historical accuracy and utterly fantastic martial arts and choreography; and, of course, Jackie Chan who introduced comedic martial arts and incredible stunts to the genre.

RM: Take a wild guess. Without Bruce Lee, kung-fu movies in Hong Kong might have remained knock-offs of Peking Opera and American serials, loaded with long, but fake, fights. And without Enter The Dragon, the American market might never have been galvanized, creating a desire in the non-Asian audience that the Hollywood powers-that-be have still not been able to quell or completely ignore. Even Jackie Chan attained his success by playing against Bruce Lee's approach.

a variation of Jimmy Wang Yu or David Chiang...which might not have worked for Jackie, or the audience, at all.

ACC: *What makes for an exceptional martial arts movie for each of you?*

RM: A movie that works on every level: action, character, story, and filmmaking (in that order). Each has to be exceptional for what it is. In other words, the script for Enter The Dragon was no great shakes compared to Hamlet, but it was more than adequate for a comic book picture designed to showcase Bruce Lee. I also have a soft spot for what I call "quintessential kung-fu movies" - - that is, movies for, by, and of martial arts. Movies, that if you tried to replace the kung-fu with any other kind of fighting, would cease to exist. Liu-chia Liang (Legendary Weapons Of Kung-Fu) specialized in that sort of thing, while Jackie Chan eschews it completely. Little wonder they didn't get along on Drunken Master 2.

KP: An exceptional film, one that would earn 4 Stars, would have to bring all the expected elements to the screen in an exceptional manner. This would include extremely talented martial artists starring in the film, a great choreographer, an interesting, believable storyline, great production values, and good music. If the film is historical, it should be accurate, as should the martial art styles depicted.

BP: We all probably agree on this: exhilaration! If the film doesn't exhilarate and excite me, forget it. I prefer those films in which the hero must learn a style or new form to overcome his enemy. Liu Chia-liang's Master Killer and Return of the Master Killer" and Jackie Chan's Snakes in Eagle's Shadow and Fearless Hyena are good examples.

ACC: *Do you have a favorite martial arts movie?*

KP: This is probably the hardest question to answer. I don't think I could pick just one, and I'd be hard pressed to limit myself to just ten. I know the list would certainly include *Heroes Of The East* aka *Challenge Of The Ninja*, *Legendary Weapons Of China*, *Thundering Mantis*, *Enter The Dragon*, *The Leg Fighters*, *Snakes In Eagle's Shadow*, *Drunken Master*, *Once Upon A Time In China*, *My Young Auntie*, *Tai Chi Master*, etc., etc.

RM: Several. Because there are several types of kung-fu movies, I can't limit it to just one. Despite all I've said prior to this, my favorite Bruce Lee movie is not *Enter The Dragon*. It's actually *Chinese Connection* (HK: *Fist Of Fury*). Favorite Jackie: Project A. Other favorites: *The Prodigal Son* and *Once Upon A Time In China*. Best filmed kung-fu fight of all time: *Heart Of The Dragon*. Best kung-fu streetfight: *Dragon Lord*. Best "realistic" kung-fu fight: *Return/Way Of The Dragon* and *Wheels On Meals*.

BP: I couldn't even give you a top-ten list. In our database, we have nearly 400 films with a 3 1/2 or 4 Star rating, and our personal collection tops 500 films.

ACC: *Will there be future updated volumes of this excellent book?*

KP: I certainly hope so. Right now, Bill and I are working on an updated, CD Rom version of the Encyclopedia. And thank you for calling it excellent!

BP: I hope so! We've added nearly 400 films to our database since the book was submitted to the publisher. And, with the help of readers and fans, we know the next book will be even better.

RM: With luck.

ACC: *Well, thanks to everyone for taking the time out to chat with us and good luck to all of you in all of your future endeavors!*

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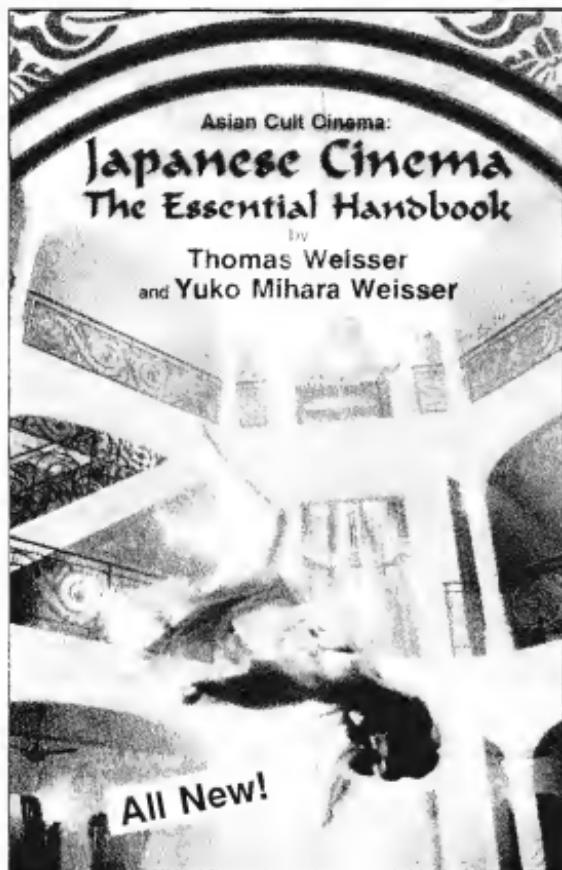
In the recent Hong Kong Music Poll '96, actor Jacky Cheung was honored as the most popular singer in Hong Kong. In his acceptance speech, he announced that this is definitely the year he will marry his long-time fiancee, May Lu. She later told the press that if he delayed the wedding again, she would have him arrested for breach of contract.



George Law finally secured a divorce. He and Sally Yip (pictured) are now officially engaged. Plans are underway for them to make a movie together. It would be Sally's first film in years.

Jackie Chan is now Doctor Chan. Hong Kong Baptist University awarded Jackie with an honorary "Doctor Of Social Science" degree when he addressed the graduating class, November 1995. In his oration, he talked about his 30 years in the entertainment business. He also surprised many fans by making reference to his wife, whom he described as "a former Taiwanese actress who lives in the US where she takes good care of my daughter."





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